2: Man G-5 (1869-1880)1932 AZ2 Andamans AZ2



576 shouting invitations and promises for a future date until beyond earshot.

7. When nearing home, after an unusually successful hunting or fishing expedition, the men raise a shout[1] of triumph in order to apprise their friends of their good fortune, and the women take up the cry and express their delight by yelling[2] and slapping their thighs; but when the encampment is entered, these sounds of rejoicing almost invariably cease for a while, and, after depositing their spoils, the hunters remain speechless for some time ere recounting their adventures and exploits: for this strange practice they appear unable to account.

8. No matutinal greetings pass between friends or between husband and wife, and inquiries relating to health are unusual unless addressed to an invalid.

• 515 9. When a man is thirsty and wishes also to wash his hands, he first, if alone, stoops down and drinks from the stream, or raises the water to his lips in a leaf or vessel; then, filling his mouth with water, he squirts it over his hands, using his unkempt locks as a towel. Should any one else be present, he would pour the water over his friend's hands as well, not from his mouth, but from a leaf.

10. They do not bathe daily, but at irregular intervals, when oppressed with the heat, or when, from some cause, as, for instance, in gathering honey,[3] their persons become sticky and unpleasant, and ablutions, consistently with comfort at least, cannot be dispensed with. It will be understood that these remarks apply to the *ēremtâ·ga-*, rather than the *àryô·to-*, who, from the nature of their pursuits, are on the whole fairly clean.[4]

[302] 11. During the hot weather they smear their bodies with common white clay, called *ōg-*,[5] dissolved in water, and avoid, as far as they are able, any lengthened exposure to the direct rays of the sun. If compelled to leave the shelter of the jungle, they are in the habit of holding a large leaf screen, *kâ·pa-jâ·tnga-*,[6] over their heads as a protection (this is also done during a shower); should they be travelling by boat they lessen the discomfort caused by excessive heat by pouring water over themselves, or by plunging overboard and swimming alongside the canoe for some part of the way.

[1] There is a specific term for this description of shouting, viz.: *tī·reblake*, while that of the women in answer thereto is called —

[2] *rō·moke*.

[3] *Vide* Appendix H (*lad·a chàu-*, lit., dirty body).

[4] They never allow vermin to breed on their persons — in fact, such a thing could not possibly occur, owing to the constant shaving of the head, painting of the person, and, in the case of the *àryô·to-*, immersion in the sea while fishing and turtling.

[5] *Vide* Appendix B, item 59.

[6] *Vide* Appendix B, item 74.

6: Cipriani E-5 (1951-1953)1961 AZ2 Andamans AZ2
Onge



now follow them, often ignoring their original significance and symbolism. Among the Onge, spirits are feared but not loved ; the same applies to God Himself.

The Onge bury their dead in trenches, no deeper than three feet. Earth is tightly packed over the graves in order to prevent exhalations. Full details on the subject of Onge burial customs appear in the book that I am writing about the Onge. I slept with the Onge in communal huts that contained fresh graves, without suffering any inconvenience from the smell of the corpses. This recalls the palaeolithic sepulchral caves, where man probably lived as the Onge live in their sepulchral huts today.

There are no latrines near Onge camps – whether permanent or temporary. Excrements are spread carelessly all around, lightly covered with leaves and earth. Flies lay eggs on them. The Onge's only precaution is not to defecate where drinking water might be found after rainfall. With so many opportunities for reproduction, in some places flies form such clouds as to impress the natives themselves. In the north of Little Andaman a creek was named after the flies : Bumila Creek, which means "fly creek". Smells also occasionally inspire geographical names : Tambe-é-bùie, on the north-east coast of Little Andaman, means "the smelly place" in the Onge language. Flies, fleas and ticks are tolerated by the Onge who do not fight them. Fortunately, the hymenoptera collect flies for their nests, not, however, in quantities large enough to compete with the fertility of the species.

### 2. Clothing and personal care

The only garment worn by Little Andaman women is the *naquinĕghĕ*, a scanty grasslike apron covering the genitals. In addition, during menstrual periods, Onge women wear the *bataghĕ*, for hygienic purposes. This is a simple cluster of long, soft green leaves cut by the husband for his wife from special trees : Myristica longifolia and others. The only leaves used are those from the end of a stalk, a section of which is left attached to the leaves. The stalk is slipped under the *naquinĕghĕ*, while the long leaves are passed between the thighs to be fastened at the back above the buttocks. It is curious to see Onge women in such myristical attire ! The *bataghĕ* is ethnographical news, new not only as regards the Andamans : it is an interesting indication of the hygienic measures employed by primitive people, and can probably be traced to prehistoric practices in analogous circumstances. The continental and insular regions nearest to the Andamans have retained no similar custom ; their only practice is the strict isolation of menstruating women. Among the Onge, on the other hand, they are allowed free circulation. Washing is unknown to the Onge : they never wash their bodies intentionally. Brushing through the thick forest and diving into the sea or the river to collect food substitute adequately for washing. The Little Andaman forest is nearly always dripping ; moving among the trees, specially in the early morning, is equivalent to bathing. The contact of wet leaves when walking cleans the Onge's skin, for they go naked ; and as they constantly dive into the sea and rivers, they do not smell. Actually they give an impression of cleanliness – as opposed to many other dark-skinned

6: Cipriani E-5 (1951-1953)1961 AZ2 Andamans AZ2
Onge



515 people. Furthermore, the Onge skin is very soft and more elastic than is usual
[147] in human beings. For us, clothed and with a less resilient skin, a trip through the thorny Andaman forest means many small, bleeding scratches. Not so for the naked Onge. – To cover them with clothes would endanger their health. Nakedness inures them to the sudden changes of temperature so frequent in
[513] Little Andaman and preserves them from catching cold when sleeping, uncovered, on their rough, unprotected bed of boughs. As with primitives all over the world, clothes make them miserable and, I may add, very ungainly and dirty.

515 Part of their general negligence with regard to hygiene is their carelessness about their teeth. They never clean them. They do keep bamboo sticks,
[413] 1 mm thick and 8 cms long, tucked into their hair to be ostensibly used as toothpicks ; but the sticks, to tell the truth, are more of an ornament than a tool.
142 The Onge's teeth are so compact and sound that there is no space between
[164] them for food particles to collect. No caries or decay of any sort are to be noticed. In a number of skeletons that I dug up from under the beds in communal huts, the teeth gave evidence of one peculiarity : old people had worn
[289] them down to the root. The Onge habit of using teeth as working instruments, to prepare fibre for ropes and in many other circumstances – apart from their permanent chewing on hard foodstuffs – explains this fact.

515 As a consequence of never washing, the natives' hands are sometimes extremely dirty. The Onge themselves are conscious of this. I shall give an
226 instance. It so happened that I arrived in Nachugé, on the west coast, toward the end of March, when the sea was teeming with migrating sardines. In Little Andaman sardines can weigh up to a pound ; but a normal catch, obtained with small hand-nets cast from canoes among shoals of fish imprisoned by the low tide within the coral reef that surrounds the island, contains specimens of
[264] every dimension. All are eaten as soon as possible. The quantity of fish brought back to the camps on such occasions puts all inmates to work and induces everybody to abandon all other occupations for the time being. In the low tidal waters the men push their canoes from rock to rock, using them as receptacles for the abundant food so easily collected. In some "pockets" nets prove unnecessary : the fish is gathered in handfuls and rapidly thrown into the canoes. The hecatomb ends when the canoes are filled to the gunwales. In no other part of the world have I seen food made available to primitive people in such large quantities and with so little effort.

252 Back at the camp, the sardines are "graded" according to size and cooked immediately. They are not washed or cleaned, the inner organs are eaten to-
[263] gether with the flesh. Men, women and children feverishly take part in the cooking ; the fish is boiled without salt. All the natives then plunge their hands
264 avidly into the heap of sardines. From time to time the women clean their
515 hands by rubbing them on the *naquinēghē*. Very soon this garment becomes
[231] extremely smelly. Men and children clean their hands in a different way : by rubbing them on the dogs. On such occasions, everything and everybody smells of fish for days and days. The first to become clean again are the dogs, because they hate to be smeared with fish and wash themselves in the sea as soon as they have a chance.

6: Cipriani E-5 (1951-1953)1961 AZ2 Andamans AZ2
Onge



Endogamous life, or the habit of never washing even the female genital organs, cannot be the only cause of Andamanese sterility. Alcohol and venereal diseases such as syphilis may only be a complementary cause. The Onge's limited fertility probably derives from other factors besides their protracted and inceasingly strict endogamy.

We can only remark that Onge women rarely become pregnant before 28 ; their fertility ceases around the age of 48. The high rate of sterility among Onge women after marriage (which generally takes place at the age of 14) is puzzling indeed. Of several childless couples that I studied in Little Andaman, the woman was under 28. There is hope of fertility after that age. It could so happen, for instance, in the case of two young Onge chiefs, Okkeggi and Chendubai, married to two sisters among the most beautiful and flourishing girls on the island : Ooaghēghē and Tocooaghēghē, both around 20. They never became pregnant, although menstruation was normal and they had plenty of sexual intercourse, even extra-marital.

The delayed appearance of fertility in Andamanese women is probably connected with a general biological condition fostered by unhygienic habits. For instance : young Onge females have a high vagina acidity content that is certainly harmful to spermatozoa. It decreases with age, facilitating, we may suppose, fecundation. Vaginal washing would help, but the Onge women never recur to it. But this is only one side of the question. It is evidently urgent to do whatever is necessary to save the Onge from extinction. We must remember that civilized nations, through international agreements, are anxious to protect plant and animal species from disappearance. The same should be done for man, and equivalent international laws are needed. The Onge as a human group are on the verge of extinction ; but they still retain enough vitality to be rescued before they finally vanish into eternity.

Without enlarging here on the disorders of Onge sexual life and their dire effects also on the number of births, I wish to point out one more fact : Onge homosexuality as a normal occurrence. It is a plague in Little Andaman, helped by the regular physiological functions of both extremities of the digestive tube. The sexual tendencies that prevail in Little Andaman are a strong criticism of FREUD's theories on sexual life, but I will not discuss this here. I would rather say a few words about some opinions regarding the cause of Onge sterility that I heard expressed in the Andamans. Foreigners there ascribe it to the *naquinēghē* – the grass-like apron worn by women. Colonists believe that this garment leads to copulation from the rear, reducing the chances of fecundation. This idea is incorrect : the Onge never do this because the *naquinēghē* can be easily lifted as required, and pulled up over the abdomen. It is true that Onge women remove the *naquinēghē* only to replace it with a fresh one ; they wear it even when sleeping. Not for a single instant must women remain "undressed", for superstitious reasons. When a new *naquinēghē* is needed, the old one is furtively disposed of. Husband and wife repair secretely to a remote part of the forest, the woman slipping the new garment over her head before removing the old one, and burying the latter, which is quickly destroyed by white ants. The Onge believe that possession by a stranger of a worn

6: Cipriani E-5 (1951-1953)1961 AZ2 Andamans AZ2
Onge



no specialized physicians, the Onge do not understand that payment can be exacted for medical care. This stems from the fact that wages are not considered by those happy people as payment for any kind of work whatsoever, but only as a gift. I realized this when I tried to pay my guides after our extenuating marches through the jungle : in order to avoid offending the natives that we had casually met in the course of our trip, I had to give equal reward to everybody.

The Onge consider some men or women better endowed than others with anti-malefic influence ; but these too neither demand nor receive wages for their services. Evil spirits or evil persons are believed to be principally responsible for illness. A series of superstitions and remarkable habits derive from this belief. The above-mentioned precautions concerning the *naquinēghē* are among them. For identical reasons they carefully hide hair cuttings, but not nail parings, for the simple reason that nails are never cut but worn down by digging for edible roots, fishing, and other rough work. Superstition, as we know, is also the reason for painting the body to prevent fever and other ills.

In the depths of their jungle the Onge appear to practice some kind of witchcraft. On several occasions I noticed the mysterious behaviour of some natives travelling with me. Occasionally a man left our marching column to examine the inside of a huge hollow tree and signal to his friends. They did not prevent me from looking into the hollow, where I saw only a simple structure of short sticks resembling a trap without being one. The Onge do not use traps ; moreover, those structures were far too flimsy to catch anything. Often, two or three men assembled in consultation, rearranged the sticks that had probably been dislodged by the passage of lizards, crabs or other small animals, and walked away silently. I could get no explanation on the matter. Certainly the Onge are sagacious observers of animal and vegetable life and have deep knowledge of their hidden properties. Some trees are probably used for magical purposes, but, I insist, it is impossible as yet to affirm it. The structures in question consisted of four vertical sticks, about 30 cms long, joined at the top by four more sticks of approximately the same length, placed horizontally. The result was a box-like frame, loose and unsecured. The slightest disturbance, such as a light breeze, could destroy the flimsy construction. As far as I could guess they invested those structures with curative properties, but in what manner remains a mystery. I noticed analogous practices among Central African Pygmies and other primitives.

It is very clear that the Onge dread illness and magic spells, for they consider themselves at a loss in fighting such evils. Unhygienic habits are of no importance to them.

Resting is considered favorable to good health. The Onge indulge voluptuously in rest, interrupting it, however, with too frequent sexual excursions. They mainly rest from doing nothing, because 90 % of their time is spent in what, for them, is the most agreeable manner of enjoying life.

In mid-March, when the honey harvest reaches its peak, the Onge guzzle

6: Cipriani E-5 (1951-1953)1961 AZ2 Andamans AZ2
Onge



262 immense quantities of it together with pork. I was with them three times when
517 this recurred, so I could observe their behaviour exhaustively. With their
302 bellies full, the natives rest. Their only activity is body painting, performed by
178 the women on the skin of their peacefully sleeping husbands. Designs change from time to time as I said before, according to the women's inventiveness. Each family challenges the others in renewing their patterns. The best are later reproduced until the next change. From year to year I noticed no real evolution in this rudimentary art, but a cyclical fashion, with temporary preference, in males and females alike, for some geometrical designs, unconnected with whatever kind of food they had been eating. This contradicts the published af-
114 firmations of several authors, who allege that the Andamanese paint special
302 patterns in special colours for different kinds of food. There is nothing more
[262] false, at least with reference to the Onge. Merry feasting, whether on pork
[751] turtle, dugong, fish or honey, leads to a period of rest and body decoration –
[515] always in similar patterns and colours – with the unique purpose of preventing illness. We might say that painting the body is equal to cleaning it, but this is quite unintentional. A curious exception to the Onge's filthy habits is the
264 practice of sweeping the floor after solemn banquets in communal huts. The
356 surface of the floor consists of unpacked earth hardened by casual tramping.
342 When it is dry, sweeping raises a heavy dust that fills the hut to the ceiling.
251 It deposits there on the wooden beams where the Onge like to store cooked
262 victuals. So they eat their food, as I said before, coated with dust, no matter
412 how thick. A brush without a handle is used to sweep the floor ; it is 80 cms long and no thicker than a man's wrist. It is one of the nicest tools made by the Onge, and consists of strong, hard, elastic palm fibres bound together with strips of rattan. The dirt is simply thrown out all around the hut, by pushing
356 it under the roof mats that never reach the ground.

114 These notes offer a first glimpse into a peculiar aspect of Onge life. It is to be deplored that these vanishing people have not yet been exhaustively studied, notwithstanding their anthropological interest and high biological significance.

11: Cipriani E-3 (1951-1955) 1966 AZ2 Andamans AZ2
Onges



much assistance in this respect, as the muscular insertions are exaggerated in both sexes, both being subjected to continued physical effort resulting in muscular bulk.

One quite outstanding physical feature in the Onges is their teeth. The palate is unusually arched, unlike that of the African pygmies or the Bushmen. The teeth, which are never filed or cut, as many primitive peoples do for decorative purposes, are very white; caries is rare, and although never cleaned the teeth are retained till late in life. A common abnormality is that the lateral incisors are as pointed as the canines. This, with the whiteness of the teeth and eyes against the blackness of the skin, gives the Onges a sinister appearance, which may account for the old description of the Andamanese as men with ferocious dogs' heads. The only (summary) cleaning the Onge teeth receive is the use of toothpicks, thinner and rather longer than the European variety and made from the tough, flexible bark of a certain reed. After use, they are carefully thrust into the hair for future occasions. Every Onge has one or more threaded through the hair on top of the head.

The strength of the Onge teeth enables their owners to champ their way through what are for us inconceivable quantities of food, both animal and vegetable, which is chewed slowly and determinedly, dust, earth, sand and all, and then swallowed without apparent ill effects, other than the flatulence arising from overconsumption of animal matter. But the Onges use their teeth for other purposes besides eating. In time the teeth become worn down by the inevitable grinding of dirt and grit, but this does not prevent the Onges from continuing to chew the bark of trees and cords, which is a lifelong occupation. This duty falls mainly on the women, and I have seen aged women, their teeth worn almost to the gums, doggedly chewing bark as their contribution to the communal life of the group. The strength of the teeth is unbelievable – I have seen children of ten to fifteen years crush nails up to two millimetres thick, and dent lumps of iron.

I myself once had good cause to be grateful for their power. My party and I found ourselves stranded in the forest on South Brother without guns or even knives, and without cooking utensils. There were large clutches of turtle eggs buried in the sand nearby and my two Onge companions pointed out a coconut tree loaded with nuts (which turned out to be the only one on the islands, seeded

11: Cipriani E-3 (1951-1955) 1966 AZ2 Andamans AZ2



Near my camp at Labanar, in March 1932, I witnessed a distressing and fatal case. A young woman, with a baby a month old, had suckled another child, as the Onge women do. The older infant, which had cut its teeth, caused damage to the nipples and the ensuing infection spread throughout the body. The wretched woman was writhing with fever and the pain from her infected breasts and suppressed lactation. Her body had been smeared with a vermilion ochre, held to be the most powerful balm, and tightly bound, as usual. Her condition was so poor that I suggested sending her at once to Port Blair for treatment. Unfortunately, however, at that time I was only just beginning to establish contact with the Onges, and the woman's husband, after all the arrangements had been made, refused to let her go. I had not yet gained the Onges' confidence enough to be allowed near the woman, and although I was able to photograph her I could do nothing to prevent her death.

The decision to administer 'medicine' and subject patients to various treatments is not the province of any specialists, but is taken by anyone in the group; all, including the patient, accept the decision, since all are utterly convinced that it will benefit them. Medicine men and sorcerers, so numerous in Africa and elsewhere, do not exist among the Andamanese.

The Onges have not the slightest idea of any standards of hygiene. They never wash intentionally; the forest, dripping from every leaf, and frequent immersion in water while out hunting, take care of the problem. One must admit that in the circumstances their nakedness is hygienic. A small fire is kept burning beside each bed at night for warmth, a useful precaution which I found very welcome on the many cold nights which followed a very hot day. Deprived of these fires the Onges fall ill at once, a fact of which I had ample proof on several occasions when I took Onges with me out of Little Andaman; they were provided with beds and coverings in well-constructed wooden houses, but although none of them complained about the absence of the fires by their beds they all developed feverish chills.

And yet in their own territory I have seen them lie soaking wet all night in one of their temporary forest camps or a communal hut with a leaking roof without any ill effects, simply because they had

11: Cipriani E-3 (1951-1955) 1966 AZ2 Andamans AZ2



when the supply of *dorsata* diminished at the onset of the stormy season, when the gales lashing the branches dislodge the nests and hurl them to the ground.

Unlike the beekeepers of the civilized world, the Onges make no attempt to protect their bare bodies while they are extracting honey. Yet they are never stung, and watching them one felt in the presence of some age-old mystery, lost by the civilized world. I watched an Onge from the ground with my field glasses as he climbed up a tree to a *dorsata* nest and saw him, as it were, blowing on the bees round about the trunk as he went up. As he approached the nest they huddled round it in a protective cloud, hiding it completely from view. Suddenly, as the Onge's face came within twenty centimetres of the boiling, humming mass, the bees seemed to shrink back as he blew on them. Not one moved to attack as he gouged out the combs with his bare hands, throwing handfuls of bees out into the air. And then the whole cloud of bees gathered into a swarm and left the tree and the nest to the interloper.

The Onge stripped lengths of green bark from the lianas growing up the tree, and then broke the nest up. Tying the combs to his back with the strips of bark he lowered himself down to the ground, swinging like an ape from liana to liana. There, while his friends fell on the honey, he calmly cleaned himself down – with not one sting on him. This he did in a way unusual for the Onges, filling his mouth with water from a nearby pond and squirting it into his cupped hands, until he had enough in his hands for a perfunctory rub down. This method of washing is common in primitive peoples but advanced for the Onges. When they have been painting themselves with the usual fat and ochre paste, for example, the women will clean their hands to their satisfaction by wiping them on their *naquineghe*, while the men use the dogs' coats as a convenient towel.

In March 1952, in the middle of the honey season, I was on the west coast of Little Andaman, near Nachuge. Twelve Onges were with me, and when they noticed a bees' nest high up in a *Pterocarpus* the youngest of them at once climbed up after it. As soon as he saw that the combs were full of honey, with no larvae, he called for a container. With amazing speed he tore enough bark off the nearest liana with his teeth to make a cord over twenty metres long and the hollowed-out log was soon hauled up, to come down again crammed with combs brimming with pale golden honey, very